

19 Is Leadership Biblical?¹

I once did a search on my seminary's website on "leader(s)/leadership" and it yielded 1916 hits. Leadership is really important to us. All three schools in the seminary offer courses on leadership – indeed, whole degree programs. They indicate a deep desire for the church's leadership to be shaped by biblical principles. Students on the way to the pastorate want their own leadership to be so shaped. Why is leadership such an important focus of people's thinking? It is a distinctive marker of U.S. culture, one of the features of the U.S. psyche that has generated the country's monumental achievements in the modern world. It reflects a part of the U.S. genome. The kind of men and women who have come to the United States over the centuries will have been people of above-average drive and initiative, people with leadership instincts. As is the case with other cultural traits, the church then mirrors the culture in its concern with leadership. It is also a distinctive marker of the church in the United States. This will link with the monumental achievements of the U.S. church, for instance in church building and in foreign missions. In turn, the seminary mirrors the church which mirrors the culture.

1 "Leaders" in Scripture

It is then striking that the words "leader" and "leadership" are rather rare in the Bible. Two Hebrew words traditionally translated "leader" are *nasi'* and *sar*; both usually refer to people in an official position of leadership (they are also translated by words such as "ruler" and "officer"). Among other Hebrew words, some recent translations have illuminatingly used "leader," "lead," and "leadership" in connection with the *shopetim*, conventionally the "judges." These were people who led without being in an official position. In the New Testament, the word most commonly translated "leader," *archon*, likewise suggests someone in an official position, but etymologically the verb *hegeomai* (see especially Luke 22:26) is similar to "lead" in the way it works as a metaphor. But there are not words in Hebrew and Greek that actually correspond to "lead" and "leader."

Now the fact that a language lacks a word does not mean the culture lacks the concept that the word refers to. Yet alongside that fact about U.S. culture, this linguistic phenomenon puts us on the track of the fact that leadership as such is not something the Bible focuses on. Leadership resembles topics such as the rights of women or peacemaking. They are topics that we think important, and in connection with them we can seek scriptural material to resource us in pursuing our interest, but they are not topics scripture itself directly focuses on. There are indeed many people in scripture who (in our terms) act as leaders, people such as Moses, Deborah, Gideon, David, Esther, Peter, and Paul, not to say Jesus. Yet the scriptures do not have a term for them; they do not seem to see them as belonging to one category. Among the deuterocanonical writings, Ecclesiasticus 44 - 45 does so: such figures are *endoxoi*, people held in honor. Like our term "leaders," that is a generic expression that reflects its culture. This offers

¹ Not previously published. But see also my *Authority and Ministry* (Bramcote, UK: Grove, 1976).

food for thought. While the scriptures' inclusion of so many stories that refer to the activity of "leaders" means we can use their stories to speak to our agenda, it is our agenda. We might also be interested in discovering what scripture suggests is God's agenda, and in conforming our agenda to that.

There is another caveat suggested by scripture's way of speaking of leaders. U.S. Christians often assume that the main significance of the stories of people such as Moses or Deborah or Gideon is to give us models for our life of faith and obedience, and specifically role models for leadership. The First Testament does not give the slightest impression that Israelites or Israelite leaders were supposed to take these people as their models. Even Heb 11, which offers them as models of faith, does not take them as models of leadership (though Hebrews is the letter that talks most about "leaders," in Heb 13). This reflects the fact that in general the Bible is about God. It is about what God has done, more than about what human beings have done. When God created the world, the idea was that humanity should be active in it, serving God's purpose in the world. But this did not work, and God had to get involved in the world to put things right. The Bible is the story of God's doing so.

Accepting this does not come easily to humanity. Again, it is especially a U.S. trait. We want to fix things. We want to make a difference. We read the stories of Moses and Deborah and Gideon as people who made a difference and who can therefore inspire us.

The Bible implies different significance in their stories. Moses, for instance, was a headstrong and unwilling draftee who never showed leadership ability. He was the feeblest man on earth (Num 12:3). The word used of him, *'anaw*, usually means "poor" or "weak" and there is no basis for translating it "meek" except the presupposition that the story could not be describing Moses as "weak." Fortunately it did not matter that Moses was weak; he did not need any leadership qualities, because he did not have to do anything except tell Pharaoh and the Israelites what God said.

2 Visionary Ideal and Inspired Compromise

If "the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality,"² this will include defining the reality of leadership. In a Christian context, such a definition will need to be a biblical theological one. I suggest that leadership as we understand it is a subset of patriarchy and that a biblical theology of leadership is a subset of the biblical doctrine of sin. It is therefore not surprising that scripture has little positive interest in leadership.

At the Beginning, God did make leadership part of the way the world was created. Leadership was going to be needed if the world was to be subdued and made into a place that worked by peace and order, and the agents made responsible for this leadership were the human beings God created (Gen 1:26-28). In the second creation story, likewise God planted a garden, formed a gardener, put him in the garden to "keep" it (literally, to "serve" it), and then provided him with a co-worker, but did not tell Adam to exercise headship over Eve. In both stories, it was humanity as a whole that was commissioned to subdue the world and serve the garden. There was no

² Max De Pree, *Leadership is an Art* (reprinted New York: Dell, 1990), p. 11.

leadership of one human being over others, only leadership of the world by humanity as a whole. As Bob Dylan put it in "Gates of Eden" (on the album *Bringing It All Back Home*), "There are no kings inside the Gates of Eden."

Or as Jesus put it, "from the beginning of creation" it was not so (Mark 10:6; cf. Matt 19:8). Jesus provides his disciples with a crucial hermeneutical clue for understanding the scriptures. From either Testament you can justify male headship or slavery or war because much of the Bible is written "because of your hardness of heart" (Mark 10:5). Jesus' particular concern at this point is the legitimacy of divorce. There is no doubt that the scriptures allow it, yet divorce stands in tension with the way God created man and woman (Mark 10:6-9; cf. Gen 1 - 2). The scriptures are not simply a collection of visionary ideals, though they are that. They are also a collection of timely compromises.

This does not mean they cease to be God's word; Jesus takes the regular Jewish attitude to the impeachable authority of the scriptures. No one ever accused him of any other attitude. Rather he points to the realization that part of their marvelous inspiration is their combining eternal ideal and timely compromise. If we had only the timely compromise, nothing would pull us toward the eternal ideal. If we had only the eternal ideal, nothing would help us live in the everyday world. Their being this combination is a magnificent expression of God's grace. So when lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage yielded to all sorts of other patterns of relationship, the Torah regulated some of these to safeguard against gross disorder and to protect the weak. Outside the garden, humanity's serving the earth met with the earth's resistance, harvests failed, and people had to sell their labor to their peers. The Torah regulates that by allowing indentured labor to last long enough for people to get on their feet, without their employers being able to turn them into permanent slaves. (Employment, which to us seems natural, is thus another variant on making things work east of Eden, but "from the beginning it was not so" - we were not designed to sell our labor.) When we seek to shape our lives by these scriptures, we learn from the way they expound eternal ideals and from the way they make needed compromises. One of the significances of the Sermon on the Mount (where a briefer version of the comment on divorce recurs, in Matt 5:31-32) is that Jesus here calls his disciples to live by creation's standard. The disciples are, of course, appalled (Matthew 19:10), and Acts and the Epistles show that the New Testament churches did not do so.

3 Theology of Leadership as a Subset of the Doctrine of Sin

The practice of leadership within humanity rather than by humanity is another aspect of the way sin came to spoil human life. The distortion of leadership began with the activity of the serpent, who was supposed to be led but was clever enough to be the first leader in scripture apart from God. After it has succeeded in its leadership, God declares that the result will be to damage not only marriage and work but human partnership. Henceforth one human being will rule over another. Leadership is thus "toxic" in its

origin, and is generally portrayed as toxic through scripture.³ Hosea 10:3-4 uses this image in describing *mishpat* (the noun from that word *shopet* “leader”) as “springing up like poisonous weeds.” The *shopetim* and the kings (that is, both non-official and official leaders in Israel) illustrate this well, as do prophets, priests, and sages. Hosea 13:9-11 thus takes up a comment on the community’s desire for kings and *shopetim* and sees God’s involvement in the rise and fall of such leaders as an expression of divine wrath.

“All kings is mostly rapscallions” (Huckleberry Finn)⁴ – and presidents and CEOs, not to say quite a few senior pastors and seminary presidents. Again because the church is part of the culture, it is not surprising that Christian leadership in state and church continues to be toxic. We experience this regularly in church life. In political life, at the time of writing it seems possible that the U.K. and the U.S.A. have got themselves into a moral and strategic mess in Iraq, and if they have, this has not issued directly from the British and American peoples but from their leaders, most of whom are committed Christians – from the politicians who made the decisions and the pastors who taught them, preached to them, and supported them.

Initially a theology of leadership is a subset of the doctrine of sin because it has its origin in sin; instead of exercising leadership over the creation, humanity let itself be led by creation. It is a subset of the doctrine of sin because the work of a leader is spoiled by the leader’s sin (see Moses’ story). It is so because the necessity of leadership issues from the fact of sin in the community (see Judges and the development of leadership in New Testament and post-New Testament churches). It is so because the desire to be a leader is an expression of sin (see Abimelech’s story, and many others). It is so because the desire to have leadership is an expression of sin (see the story of the introduction of the monarchy). It is so because a leader has opportunity to be much more sinful than ordinary people (see David’s story). It is so because leaders have opportunity to lead their community in sin (see the stories of many priests and prophets). Continuing the pattern in scripture, Christian history provides many stories of Christian leadership being a main means of expressing and encouraging sin.

Now Christians who think about leadership are aware of that and seek to take account of it. They do so by emphasizing (or instance) that we need to pay attention to the spiritual and moral formation of the leader. But this is to fail to take the *theological* point seriously, in at least two senses. First, it is equivalent to saying that because they are sinners, human beings in general need to work harder at being good. The total depravity of humanity means this cannot work, and the total depravity of humanity means not only that it cannot work for leaders either but also that the consequences of leaders’ sin will be much greater. Second, attention to the dynamics of redemption suggests that the church can no more settle down for accepting leadership as one of our givens than it can accept the subordination of women, slavery, or war. These two theological points are of course in

³ On the notion of “toxic leadership,” see, e.g., Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2005).

⁴ Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (reprinted Mineola, NY: Dover, 1994), p. 116.

tension with each other. Sin means we must avoid having leadership; sin means we must have leadership. It is the same tension that Jesus identified.

4 So Where Do We Go From Here?

In light of this, what would be a pastor's vision for his or her leadership? And in what direction would he or she like to see the church grow in its leadership, maybe in the medium or long term?

First, while scripture rarely describes people as leaders, it often describes someone we would call a leader as a servant of God; Moses is the great example, though the point applies to many others. Contemporary interest in the designation "servant" contrasts with our preference for "leader" (a search on my seminary's website for servant(s)/servanthood generated 206 hits). Further, even if we do think in terms of service, we likely think in terms of serving other people. Scripture itself does relate the forming of Adam to serve the garden and does record the advice given to Rehoboam about service in 1 Kings 12:7 (though this may point to servant leadership as a ploy). But that preferred designation in scripture presupposes that being a servant means serving God. People such as Moses are God's servants, not their people's servants.

It is still the case that there are no grounds for reckoning that Moses as servant of God is an example for us. The point about Moses is that he had a unique role, and the significance of calling him "servant of God" is not to frame our imitation of him but to encourage us to take seriously what he said and did. Yet the designation does suggest a further reframing of the question about leadership that we especially need in our culture. It links with the fact that scripturally considered, the art of leadership is part of Wisdom, part of the way we find insight on life from the life that we live, in our culture. That is Wisdom's strength and its limitation. When scripture takes on the insights of other people's wisdom, it recognizes the need to subject them to the reframing of faith and ethics (Prov 1:1-7). In this case, that reframing would mean we stop talking about leadership and start talking about servanthood (and let's have less weasel talk of "servant leaders," please). Of course describing yourself as a servant can be ideological, and has been another way of facilitating sin.

Second, New Testament congregations were never led by individuals but only by groups, which suggests a pattern for all congregations. The church did feel the need to develop the "monarchical episcopate" (that is, the position of senior pastor), but subsequent history makes clear that this is as capable of encouraging sin as reducing it, like the introduction of the monarchy in Israel. Leadership by a group can safeguard against the toxic leadership of individuals, though one might end up with toxic leadership by a group. Nations such as the U.S.A. with powerful individual leadership may achieve more than nations such as the U.K. which do not have presidential-style leadership, but that also risks their making bigger moral mistakes.

Third, the church's calling is to imagine our way back into the Garden, as it is with other matters such as relations between the sexes, in light of what God has done for us in Christ and does in the Holy Spirit. That would imply seeking to do without leadership. A church could delegate responsibility to a group it elects, without there being any standing for election. The group could make decisions by consensus. A different person

could chair its meetings each year. We would achieve less, but we might also sin less. If this worked, it would be an aspect of the modeling of an alternative reality that is the church's vocation, instead of the church simply baptizing the culture.

When the prophets reflected on the fact that God had brought the monarchy to an end, some responded by promising that God would restore it, and this subsequently gave the first Christians a way to think about the significance of Jesus. But Second Isaiah saw God having the kind of covenant relationship with the people as a whole that God had once had with David, in keeping with God's earlier intention that Israel as a whole should be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Isa 55:3-5; Exod 19:5-6). It is odd that the church has left the Jewish community to live by that vision better than the church has.

In the world we will continue to need leadership. But the church's job is to be an alternative community that embodies God's vision for the whole world.